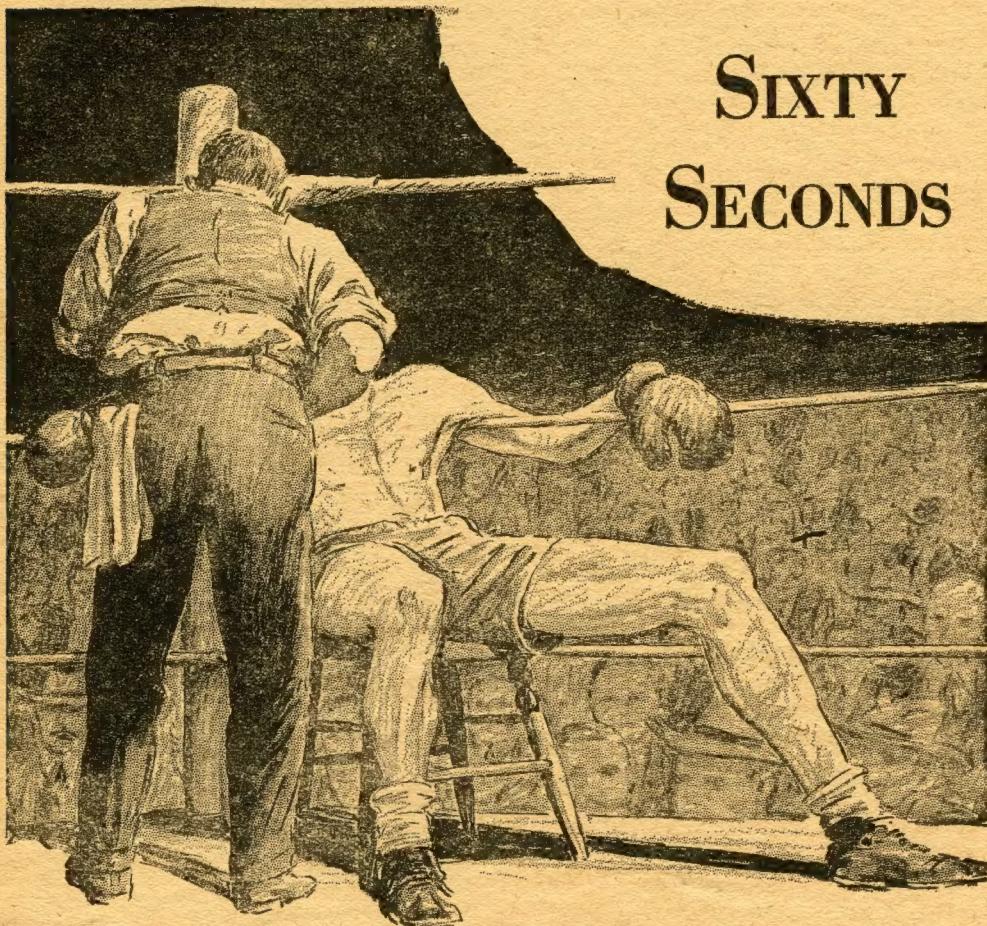


Suddenly, As the Challenger Caught a Certain Expression on His Trainer's Face, Things Began to Add Up



SIXTY SECONDS

By JACK KARNEY

WHEN the ovation for the Champ had dulled sufficiently for the announcer to be heard, he introduced the blond-haired Challenger, Johnny Cooper. The derisive cries rode the wind like summer thunder.

They laughed, taunted.

"Cry-baby, give out with the tears, cry-baby."

Johnny's lips hardened into a thin white line. He leaned back on his stool, closed his eyes against the jeering crowd.

He said to Bill Slade, his manager, "The hell with them."

But it hurt inside. He loved the fight

game, the smell of resin and sweat, the crazy fans. For ten years he had given them everything he had, to the best of his ability. And now, in his final fight, they were riding him.

What hurt most was that it wasn't his fault, not really. It started with the fight he'd dropped to the tough Mexican, a close ten-rounder that could have been called a draw. Bill Slade had unburdened himself somewhat explosively. He howled to the reporters, appealed to the Commissioner, took a corner post on Jacobs Beach and told everyone within earshot that his boy had been robbed.

Johnny had begged him to cut it out. What good was kicking about a decision?

Like arguing with the baseball umpire, it got you nothing but a sore throat.

The next fight was an eight-rounder with a Polack from Chicago. Johnny beat the Polack decisively, five rounds to two and one even. Again Bill Slade cried, this time against the referee for permitting the Polack to use rough tactics. The reporters listened, smiled furtively and left.

The next day, Kelly of the *Tribune* said, "Win or lose Johnny Cooper is sure to beef. Lately he's become a cry-baby—"

THE bell rang and the crowd moved forward in their seats, expectantly, eager-eyed. Johnny came out slowly, remembering Bill Slade's orders to box the Champ for a few rounds. The order had surprised Johnny. It was his idea to come out punching. After all, he was no chippy. Ten years in the pro ranks had taken something out of him, whereas the Champ was in his prime. What was more, the Champ was a master at boxing. But Johnny was used to taking orders. Long ago he'd learned that the manager was his eyes, his brain.

Johnny came back to his corner. They'd spent the first round playing around, feeling each other out. Once the Champ had beat Johnny to the punch, sent him reeling from a short left to the head.

Johnny said, "I got no business boxing that baby, Bill. He's greased lightning."

Bill Slade stood over him, restless eyes in a long yellow face. "I'll call the shots, Johnny, you play 'em, huh?"

Johnny shook his head. It didn't make sense, an old-timer boxing a youngster who had sweet music in his legs, lightning juice in his long arms. At the end of the third round, Johnny's eyes were troubled. Something obscure and indefinable. Maybe it was the way Bill Slade worked over him, carelessly, somewhat sloppily, not like the sure-fingered handler of previous fights. Maybe it was the odd light in Bill's eyes. It was a smugly satisfied look, complacent.

"Bill," Johnny said, "what the devil goes on?"

Bill Slade fumbled with the sponge, dropped it, picked it up. Johnny shot him a curious look. "Bill, I'm going out slugging the next round, ain't I?"

"Two more rounds. The Champ'll slow down, then you can chop him up."

Johnny met the Champ in the center of the ring. The Champ moved around Johnny, stabbed him with a razor left, brought the right down in a choppy motion. Johnny went back. He blocked a left, never saw the right. There was a roar in his head and the red lights shimmied, broke into a thousand dirty pieces. Down on one knee, he shook his head, clearing his blurred vision. He pushed himself up. The Champ came rushing but Johnny grabbed and held, tied him up neatly. Over the Champ's shoulder, Johnny glanced toward his corner. Always when in trouble, he looked to Bill Slade for advice, for moral support.

Bill Slade stood there, stiff and unmoving, a look of triumph on his hawk-nosed face. Even as Johnny stared, the look disappeared as if wiped off with a hand. But Johnny had seen it and suddenly everything began to add up.

Bill had worked him hard during training, harder than he'd ever worked before. Johnny had protested at the extra miles of roadwork, the long rounds with his sparring partners, secret sessions away from the prying eyes of the reporters.

Bill had said, "You gotta be in the best shape of your life to beat the Champ. Before I get through, you will be."

In the dressing room an hour before the fight, Bill said, "Do ten rounds of shadow-boxing."

Johnny gaped. "Ten rounds! Gee, Bill, I feel kind of tight now—"

"Do you good. I want those muscles warmed up, ready to go. I know you never did more than four rounds before—"

The bell rang ending the round. Johnny sat down on his stool, watched Bill Slade through suspicious eyes. Now things were beginning to make sense. That tiredness in his arms and legs. He had been over-trained, deliberately. Anger closed his throat tight. Bill Slade had picked that argument with Willie, the regular trainer so that he alone would be in his corner tonight.

"Bill," Johnny said, trying desperately to keep the harshness out of his voice, "you got any money on this fight?"

Bill glowered. "Somebody been bendin' your ear with crazy stuff?"

"I was just asking. You've bet on fights before."

"On my own boy, yes, but not on the

other—" He stopped short, a sickly pallor spreading over his face.

Bitterness cluttered Johnny's thick voice. "I said nothing about betting on the other guy, Bill."

When Johnny came back after the next round, there was a dull ache in his shoulders. He was tired, desperately tired. He flopped onto his stool.

"Bill," he said, "how much you bet on the Champ?"

"You gone nuts?"

"It's my last fight. You knew it, so you bet your roll and your share of the fight."

Bill Slade blinked, his jaw muscles working, and Johnny knew he had hit the mark. He growled deep in his throat. All he could think of now was Bill Slade's ugly face. He wanted to smash it. He'd get another second. He'd holler loud and the Boxing Commissioners would come running from their ringside seats.

Bill Slade's eyes were clear, probing. "Don't do nothing crazy, Johnny. I'm with you all the way and you know it. Don't be a cry-baby all your life."

Johnny cursed under his breath. He went out for the next round and when he returned he knew Bill Slade had him over a barrel. Who'd believe Johnny Cooper if he squawked? Who'd believe the cry-baby? He couldn't prove anything. Later, after the fight, he could start an investigation. Maybe it could be shown that Bill Slade had bet on the Champ. And maybe not.

Johnny's breath came out unevenly. He watched Bill Slade work with the sponge and water. The man worked fast, accomplished nothing. He killed precious seconds with the sponge, leaving no time to rub new life into Johnny's throbbing muscles. Johnny cursed loud and fluently but Bill Slade didn't answer.

A cold tightness swelled up in Johnny's throat. What the devil was the matter with the Commissioners, the referee, the crowd? Couldn't they see how Bill Slade was stall-ing?

Rage sent Johnny running from his corner at the bell. He'd teach Bill Slade to bet on the other guy. He'd rip the Champ's head off, cost Bill every cent he owned.

Suddenly he was down on hands and knees, shaking the thunder out of his head. He ran his tongue over his lips, tasted blood.

He took a full count, got up, feet braced, waiting. The Champ jumped a left into his face, crossed a right. Johnny caught it on his shoulder, let it slide off harmlessly. They exchanged light taps in the Champ's corner.

Johnny returned to his corner on wobbly legs.

"Give me a shot of air," he said to Bill, looking around for the miniature oxygen tank.

Bill said, "Told you the tank was on the blink."

Johnny's voice dripped sarcasm. "You told me what?"

"Maybe I forgot. Johnny, don't do nothing foolish."

The veins on Johnny's neck stuck out like blue wires. "You'll never collect that dough, Bill."

"I don't know what you're yappin' about."

In the tenth round Johnny came out of a clinch, a deep gash over his left eye. The heel of the Champ's glove had ripped open an old scar.

Exhaustion distorted Johnny's face when he returned to his corner at the end of the round. Bill Slade washed the wound, doused it with collodion, covered it with adhesive. Nice and easy, no time for anything else. In previous fights, Bill could fix a cut in half a minute. Now it took him the full rest period leaving no time for even a sip of water for his fighter.

THE Champ poked with his left, missed the adhesive, tried again and again to dislodge it. Johnny felt it slipping, a dribble of blood running down to his eye. Weariness and despair brought an involuntary sob from his lips. What kind of tape? Damn that Bill. The tape had probably been given a heat treatment, drying the gum.

Johnny went back to his stool, hot words on his bruised lips. But he never uttered them. Suddenly, working over him, was the old Bill Slade with his eighteen years of experience. He squeezed water over Johnny's head, on his chest, ran his finger along the rubber top of the trunks, letting the cool liquid run down. He slapped Johnny's arm muscles, whispered advice into his ear.

Johnny's forehead puckered. Now what? Had he been wrong about Bill? No. He was positive—yet, this made no sense.

Bill said, "You can take that big mattress.

He's a sucker for a feint and a right cross. Make him come to you."

Johnny said, "I don't get it. I mean, this sudden change."

"You dreaming or something? Maybe I wasn't feeling good, maybe I was nervous, but, hell, you think I don't want you to win the crown?"

Round after round Johnny came back to find Bill ready to work. And he did, quickly, expertly, giving Johnny new wind, fresh muscles, confidence. Only there was something wrong, something intangible.

The warning whistle blew for the fourteenth round. Bill slapped Johnny's shoulder. "C'mon, kid, you can take him."

Johnny eyed him shrewdly. "You really want me to win."

Bill laughed hoarsely. "You talking from heat? Do I want you to win!"

The Champ came rushing, caught Johnny with a left and right to the head, sent him staggering with a two-fisted barrage of soggy red leather. Johnny grabbed and held with desperate strength. They broke and the Champ followed him relentlessly. Johnny bounced off the ropes. The Champ came under fast, hooked his right and the tape over Johnny's eye came away. The blood came down, blinding him.

He tried to blink away the blood. A glove burst in his eyes. Suddenly his legs were weak, the juice gone. The Champ's eyes were cold, lustreless. He exploded a right and a left and Johnny went to one knee. At nine he was up, feet solid on the dirty canvas, hands hanging at his side, defenseless. Through blurred eyes he saw the distorted face of the Champ coming closer, closer—The bell was sweet music to his ears.

Bill Slade helped him back to his corner, dumped the pail of water over Johnny's head. Bill pulled a bottle out of his pocket.

"Your shot-in-the-arm," he said, pulling out the cork.

Johnny knew it was the honey and water. Always when he needed a little extra energy he would be given the mixture. When he'd first started in the boxing game he had experimented with energy-producing mixtures. Ammonia and water made him terribly sick; sugar and water had no effect; honey and water was the answer to a weary fighter's prayer.

He lifted his head back. Bill raised the bottle to Johnny's dry, cracked lips. Their eyes met. Abruptly Johnny twisted his head to one side; slapped the bottle out of Bill's hand. He'd seen something in Bill's eyes.

Johnny cried, "You put ammonia in there?"

"Crazy fool!"

Johnny said, "I figured you had something up your sleeve, playing like you'd had a change of heart."

AS MATTERS had stood at the tenth round Bill couldn't know which fighter was leading on points. It was close, too close for a man who had bet every dime. So Bill had tried to win his fighter's confidence, enough for Johnny to take one good swallow. Smart Bill. He didn't need knockout drops. That would be too obvious. But ammonia and water, hell, who'd question a mixture used by hundreds of fighters. If he, Johnny, opened his mouth, they'd sing, "Cry-baby, cry-baby."

They touched gloves and the Champ flicked his left into Johnny's face. Johnny shuffled in slowly, not swinging, saving his strength. His feet scraped dryly on the wet canvas. The Champ landed four quick lefts, but Johnny bided his time. In his heart he knew that he couldn't stand even one fast minute. He was too tired, dried out.

For one second, he thought, it's my last fight. Win or lose, I'm through. What difference would it make if I dropped the decision? Then he thought of Bill Slade and a cold fury possessed him.

The Champ missed a left. Like a flash, Johnny bobbed under, hooked his left, every ounce of weight behind it. The Champ's mouth opened, the mouthpiece flying out. Johnny crossed his right. The Champ's knees buckled and he went down on his face, rolled over on his back. At six he turned around, at eight he was on one knee. Up at nine he stood helpless. Johnny walked close, feinted with his body, exploded his left and walked to a neutral corner. As the referee counted he looked for Bill Slade, but the manager was gone.

The crowd sang its praise as Johnny went back to his corner, thinking; Poor Bill, every nickel lost. Maybe he's gone out to look for a long rope—